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Committees
Economic Development, Small
Business and Regulatory Reform VC
Families and Human Services VC
Government Operations
Health Policy

The Jacobs Report

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SPARKS FLY AT F.I.A. SENATE HEARING

A series of high profile errors in the handling of cases and exceptionally poor food stamp audits prompted the Senate Families and Human Services Committee to schedule a Thursday oversight hearing on the Family Independence Agency (FIA).

During the committee, chair Bill Hardiman (R-Kentwood) repeatedly stressed that the goal of the hearing was not to cast blame. "[The goal of the hearing] wasn't political; it wasn't to cast aspersions on one administration or another," Senator Hardiman said.

Though the chairman tried to keep discussions focused on specific problems concerning child safety and budgeting and what the Family Independence Agency was doing to resolve them, the meeting often degenerated into attacks on the department and on the Engler Administration for its past failures.

FIA Director Nannette Bowler told the committee her department was working to resolve morale issues and other problems highlighted by the media in recent months. "We cannot guarantee 'no mistakes,' but we can guarantee appropriate response," Ms. Bowler said.

She also defended caseworkers who had been absorbing unfair blame for events simply because they happened while the child or family was under an FIA case. "While we don't blame firefighters for fires and when there are deaths under their watch we still call them heroes, there are times we blame workers unwarrantedly for deaths that happen under our watch," she said.

The comment was largely in response to comments from Sen. Gilda Jacobs (D-Huntington Woods) on what the department was doing to reverse trends from the previous administration. "How do we change the process that went on for a decade where there was no concern for the health and welfare of the kids?" the senator asked.

Although the temper of testimony and questioning was already noticeably partisan, Jacobs' question ignited a series of heated exchanges that culminated in a shouting match between Ms. Bowler and Sen. Alan Sanborn (R-Richmond) over a recent case in Wayne County where a convicted pedophile was also the adoptive father of two children.

Sen. Alan Sanborn (R-Richmond) suggested the department had not done enough to investigate beyond the adoptive father's criminal record. "It's incumbent on the agency to contact police agencies," he said, also suggesting that FIA make behind-the-scenes calls to judges for additional background information.

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“What you're asking our workers to do is go on a fishing expedition,” responded Ms. Bowler. “To go to every court across the state of Michigan and see, if by chance . . . this person has a preliminary exam pending. That would require an unbelievable amount of manpower. We cannot go on a witch hunt, which is what this would be. People are innocent until proven guilty, and you can only base your action on a conviction—not on what might be, but what is.”

“You know that’s not accurate,” Sen. Sanborn countered, his voice rising to a near shout. “We're talking not about a witch hunt. We’re talking about a pedophile hunt.” At that point, he and Ms. Bowler were talking over each other and had to be gaveled by Sen. Hardiman.

Ms. Bowler noted after the hearing that, while adoption proceedings can be put on hold if one of the prospective parents is charged with a sex crime, the man in this case, though he committed the act before the adoption began, was not charged or convicted until after the adoption was completed.

She said the children were finally removed because the man's probation officer determined that having the children in the home violated the provision of his probation allowing no direct contact with children.

The committee also raised concerns about the inaccuracy of Food Assistance cases. Ms. Bowler said the department had a plan in place to improve the accuracy and is, at the recommendation of federal officials, having that plan reviewed by the accounting firm of Deloitte and Touche, which is helping other states on the same issue.

Mr. Hardiman said that he expected future hearings on other issues facing the department.

LANSING RACE COULD AFFECT ABORTION AND ANTI-GAY BILLS

Senate Republicans are awaiting the outcome of the Lansing’s mayoral race before deciding whether or not to try passage of an anti-gay ballot initiative (Senate Joint Resolution E) and an override of an abortion bill veto (SB 395). Both votes would require a 2/3 majority vote of both chambers to be successful. While the House likely has the 74 votes needed to pass each measure, success in the Senate is not as certain.

But if Democratic Senator Virg Bernero wins the Nov. 4 election, he would step down from the Senate, leaving 37 members. That would drop the two-thirds majority requirement from 26 to 25. The loss of one required vote may seem innocuous, but it would likely provide the margin of passage for Senate Joint Resolution E and an override of Governor Granholm’s veto of SB 395.

The governor said SB 395 was flawed because it didn't have an exception for the health of the mother. Should her veto receive an override, SB 395 will likely be challenged in the courts.

State Senator Gilda Jacobs represents the 14th Senate District, which includes Beverly Hills, Bingham Farms, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Ferndale, Franklin, Hazel Park, Huntington Woods, Lathrup Village, Oak Park, Pleasant Ridge, Royal Oak Township, Southfield, and Southfield Township. She is the Minority Vice Chair of the Families & Human Services Committee and the Economic Development, Small Business & Regulatory Reform Committee. She also serves on the Government Operations and Health Policy Committees.

Constituents of the 14th District may contact Senator Jacobs at sengjacobs@senate.michigan.gov or toll-free at 1-888-937-4453.

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